

# Career Pathways Programming for Adult Learners in Three U.S. Cities

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## Recommended Citation

Prins, Esther; Clymer, Carol; Foreman, Sheri Suarez; Needle, Mark; Raymond, Becky; and Toso, Blaire Willson (2018). "Career Pathways Programming for Adult Learners in Three U.S. Cities," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2018/papers/31>

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**Notes**

This project was funded in part by Institute of Education Sciences Grant No. R305H150047.

## Career Pathways Programming for Adult Learners in Three U.S. Cities

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Many adult education agencies in the USA have recently rushed to develop career pathways (CP) programs because the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), state governments, and private funders have championed CP as a workforce development and poverty alleviation strategy. The CP model offers “a series of education and training programs and support services that enable individuals to get jobs in specific industries and advance over time by successfully completing higher levels of education and work” (Strawn, 2011, p. 1).

The thin research base on CP has primarily focused on community colleges or workforce organizations (e.g., Fein, 2016; Fountain et al., 2015; Zeidenberg et al., 2010). However, these studies have limited relevance for adult basic education (ABE) providers, who typically serve adult learners with less formal education and greater literacy, language, and employment needs. To address this gap, this paper reports findings from a researcher-practitioner partnership that examined how adult education providers in Chicago, Houston, and Miami are designing and implementing CP programming, particularly for immigrants and adults with limited education.

### Background and Literature Review

CP programs are intended to help adults—including immigrants, refugees, dislocated workers, and adults with lower income and education—move up academic and career “ladders” (Estrada & DuBois, 2010). The academic core is a short-term course (or courses) that prepares students for postsecondary study and/or employment in a targeted occupational sector such as health care. Partnerships are essential for providing academic and support services (Fein, 2012).

Key features of the CP approach include: (1) provision of basic skills (reading, math, or English language) *and* career technical instruction; (2) contextualized instruction—“providing basic academic (sometimes non-academic/life) skills in the context of a vocation, academic discipline, or real-life situation” (Fein, 2012, p. 7); (3) academic supports and wraparound services; and (4) mechanisms for helping students take the next step in their education or career (e.g., academic advising, job placement assistance; Fein, 2012).

Longitudinal research shows that many CP programs have helped low-income adults achieve promising outcomes in their employment status, earnings, financial stability, educational credentials, and participation in further education and training (Anderson et al., 2017; Conway et al., 2012; Fountain et al., 2015; Gardiner et al., 2017; Maguire et al., 2010). However, most of these programs enrolled higher-level students and/or were housed at community colleges.

Our project focused on agencies that serve students with greater barriers to education and employment because many CP providers face disincentives to serving these groups (CLASP, 2014). These adults are less likely to attain academic and employment goals than those who access CP via community colleges or career-technical education, for example (CLASP, 2014).

## Methods

We selected Chicago, Houston, and Miami because they have a disproportionate share of U.S. adults with unmet literacy needs and because our adult education partners (Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition, Houston Center for Literacy, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, had a history of collaboration. The study employed a sequential, mixed-methods design (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). First, a survey of adult education providers ( $n=106$ ; 72% response rate) was used to answer four research questions: (1) What are the key features of career pathways in each city? (2) Which CP student outcome measures are most extensively used by adult education providers within and across cities? (3) Which measures (if any) are used by all adult education providers within and across cities? (4) What interim and long-term outcomes are adult education providers helping lower-skilled CP participants to achieve? The survey used

CLASP's (2013) definition of career pathways to determine whether or not agencies offered CP. Chi-square analyses were used to identify differences between cities and between organizations that said they offered CP (per CLASP) versus those that said "no" or "in development."

Next, we collected qualitative data to answer three questions: (5) Within each city, which policies and practices shape (a) CP programming for under-educated and immigrant adults and (b) coordination across systems? (6) How do selected programs design and implement CP programming? (7) Which programmatic features, policies, and other factors contribute to student success? A sequential, nested sampling design (Collins et al., 2007) was used to select providers for focus groups and case studies. We conducted focus groups with 18 providers (five to seven per city) and then selected six case study organizations that were considered successful and represented varied institutional types, CP occupational sectors, and populations (e.g., immigrants, refugees, ex-offenders). The organizations were Chicago City Colleges (Malcolm X campus), Jane Addams Resource Corporation (JARC, Chicago), Alliance for Multicultural Community Services (Houston), Houston Community College's Community-Based Job Training Program (CBO sites: AVANCE and Chinese Community Center), Miami Dade College (Florida Integrated Career and Academic Preparation program), and Lindsey Hopkins Technical College (one of more than 20 adult education centers operated by Miami-Dade County Public Schools).

Data sources included 18 class observations; 44 interviews with teachers, administrators, staff, and key partners; three focus groups with a total of 53 students; and document analysis. Using the research questions as a guide, content analysis was used to code the qualitative data.

## Findings

**RQ #1: Key Features.** The survey respondents included CBOs (58%), school district adult education programs (22%, all located in Miami), other agencies (e.g., homeless shelters, 7%), workforce development organizations (7%), postsecondary institutions (3%; under-counted because one survey was completed for each college system), libraries (3%), and K-12 schools (1%). The median enrollment for CBOs (approximately 207) was lower than that of libraries, postsecondary institutions (9,517), and school district adult education programs (2,844).

In 2014-15, 83% of respondents said they offered CP (per the CLASP definition) and another 11% were developing CP programs, highlighting the widespread adoption of this model.

The most common CP classes or services were ESL (84%), employability or work readiness (76%), and classes to transition to postsecondary education (75%). However, the other "core" CP services, such as classes combining basic skills and career-technical education (CTE)

or short-term certificate programs were less common. For each of the classes or services, more than 50% of agencies had grade-level, test score, or language entry requirements—most frequently for classes to obtain an industry-recognized credential (86%), to access specific job opportunities (86%), and to obtain a postsecondary or stackable credential (85%).

Education, child, and family services (44%) was the top occupational sector, followed by health and medical technology (38%) and information technology (30%). The most common instructional approaches were contextualized learning (81%), concurrent enrollment (50%), and transition/bridge programs (48%; another 13% of respondents were developing these programs).

CP students were predominantly female (59%), foreign-born (67%, mainly Hispanic) adults without a secondary degree (63%). More than two-thirds (69%) were classified as beginning to low intermediate ABE or ESL. About 44% received public assistance and 45% were unemployed. (Due to data discrepancies, figures are approximate.)

Only 36% of respondents said there were venues for CP coordination and planning across organizations in their city, and 54% were unsure. Of those who knew about these venues, nearly 90% participated. About one-fifth believed organizations in their city were “very effective” in working together to avoid duplicating CP services and in determining and filling gaps in CP services, compared to 42% and 44% who said “somewhat effective.”

**RQ #2 and #3: Outcome Measures.** The top outcome measures were educational level gains (85%), attaining a high school/GED® diploma (67%), obtaining initial employment (55%), and attaining a CP credential (48%). No single measure was used by all providers within or across cities. However, all but one Chicago respondent measured educational level gains, and 86% of Miami respondents measured level gains and attaining a secondary credential.

**RQ #4: Interim Outcomes.** Interim outcomes such as educational level gains or transferring to a postsecondary institution are crucial because they capture the shorter-term achievements of adults with barriers to education and employment (CLASP, 2013). On average, 32% of agencies measured the outcomes in the interim category (these mainly pertained to educational outcomes; CLASP, 2013), compared to 37% for longer-term outcomes (e.g., attaining initial employment). This finding suggests that organizations should consider additional ways to measure progress toward long-term goals, especially for employment.

**RQ #5: Practices and Policies.** Research participants considered partnerships essential for developing and delivering CP programs. As one provider stated, “It’s extremely important to have good, strong partnerships to make this work.” Key partners included CBOs, educational institutions (e.g., school districts, community and technical colleges), workforce development partners (e.g., Workforce Development Boards), government agencies (e.g., probation

departments), employers, intermediary organizations, homeless shelters, and social service agencies, among others. Partnerships served varied purposes, including program and curriculum design and development; student recruitment; instruction; support service provision and referrals; in-kind donations; career exploration and job placement; CP training, professional development, and technical assistance; and assistance with transitions to postsecondary education or training.

Challenges entailed time and resource intensiveness, establishing new partnerships, difficult relationships with workforce development partners, and competition for students, among others.

Governmental and private funders' policies were cited as both aiding and complicating CP implementation. Dedicated resources for CP in each state have helped providers establish programs. Helpful state policies included mandated career exploration and an accompanying skills inventory in adult education classes (Florida), a statewide bridge program requirement for ABE providers (Illinois), and joint reporting by adult education programs (Texas). Providers also detailed problematic aspects of state policies such as rapidly increasing enrollment targets, duplication, or a narrow definition of "job growth" for immigrants. WIOA was cited as the key federal policy that has shaped CP. WIOA has accelerated the establishment of CP classes, but some providers were also concerned about its narrow emphasis on employment (Belzer, 2017) and their ability to serve lower-level and undocumented students. Some also worried that changes to the English Literacy and Civics Education grant created a "discrepancy between the stated goal of serving the hardest-to-serve and students with the highest needs" versus "the way the funding formulas work," which tacitly encouraged serving higher-level students. Funding policy challenges included some funders' unrealistic timelines and expectations, the funding crisis in Illinois (2015-17), and the complications of combining funding streams. Providers' suggested policies to support CP programming focused on data collection (longitudinal) and sharing (across systems) and developing a better infrastructure for coordination across providers.

One aim of this study was to understand whether and how adult education organizations coordinate *across* systems to plan and implement CP in their city. Micro-level coordination occurred between a few organizations, such as formalized partnerships or relationships between employees at two agencies. At the meso level, coordination involved agencies receiving the same grant, networks and coalitions, and coordination within a large system such as a community college or Miami's school district adult education programs. Macro-level coordination is citywide or regional *and* involves various kinds of adult education providers, often with differing funders. Overall, we found more instances of micro- and meso-

level coordination than macro- level. Illinois and Miami each have a group that works on state- or city-level CP coordination, but focus group participants did not mention these groups when asked about coordination. Since city, regional, or state CP coordination efforts often involve senior administrators, more research is needed to assess program-level employees' awareness of and involvement in these initiatives.

**RQ #6: Program Design and Implementation.** The case study agencies designed and implemented CP in varied ways. Here, we discuss four programmatic features. Each agency offered contextualized instruction, but used distinct models (e.g., some basic skills classes were contextualized, others were not). They also had different staffing models, including types of staff (three to six types of teachers and support staff) and whether teachers were in-house employees or outsourced from other providers such as community colleges. The three programs that sought to improve students' financial stability all required participation in support services; as such, they hired job developers and/or employment, financial, or income support coaches, which created a more extensive, tailored support system. Other differences included the degree of interaction between basic skills and CTE teachers (minimal to extensive) and basic skills teachers' occupational expertise (most had experience in students' CP sector, but City Colleges of Chicago's bridge curricula did not require language arts teachers to have industry expertise).

Wraparound supports address common economic and social barriers to education and employment; thus, they are a key CP feature (Fein, 2012) that can enhance academic and employment outcomes (Hess et al., 2016). Case study agencies provided a combination of services or referrals for childcare; transportation; access to financial supports; financial aid for tuition, fees, and supplies; veterans, homeless, disability, or inmate services; and other supports.

Case study agencies used two models to provide support services: bundled (mandatory) supports or voluntary. Three organizations had an on-site Center for Working Families or Financial Opportunity Center, national models that require participation in two or more integrated support services, including financial coaching, employment coaching, and/or access to income supports. The other organizations also offered wraparound services. In particular, CP students at community colleges had access to supports for veterans, disabilities, tutoring, physical and mental health, financial aid, and other needs. However, non-bundled supports were voluntary, had eligibility requirements, or did not include financial literacy or counseling.

Since most research on CP has focused on community colleges or students with a secondary degree (e.g., Fein, 2016; Fountain et al., 2015), we wanted to determine whether and how students with no secondary degree or low reading, math, or English scores accessed CP classes. Two organizations and a special automotive program at Lindsey Hopkins required a secondary degree. Three organizations that admitted students without a secondary degree also

had a minimum TABE score requirement (5.0 to 9.0). By contrast, per Florida state policy, Lindsey Hopkins had an *exit* requirement for all but one of its CTE courses. This model enabled lower-level students to enroll and then demonstrate their academic *or* practice-based competence—a minimum TABE score or industry certifications, respectively—upon program completion. The case study data also indicate that some agencies do not track the percentage of students who progress from ESL, literacy, or high school equivalency classes to CP classes.

**RQ #7: Factors Contributing to Student Success.** There is no single way to design a successful CP program, but the data suggest common features that can be adapted by other organizations. All sites had caring, dedicated teachers and staff. On the whole, students were effusive about the helpfulness of teachers and staff in explaining course content and providing assistance. Second, all agencies had strong, established partnerships that enabled them to provide the requisite CP components and supports and to help students transition to postsecondary education or employment. Strong employer partnerships were especially crucial for agencies that focused on job placement. Third, support services were vital for helping lower-income students access and complete CP programs. Most agencies offered some form of case management to meet students' needs. The bundled support model offered more intensive and extensive supports, especially financial ones (e.g., credit-building products, credit review, financial counseling)—in some cases, for a lifetime. Fourth, every agency offered some combination of free or low-cost classes, financial aid, or financial incentives. Factors that contributed to success at two or more sites included effective mechanisms for enabling students to find jobs or to earn college credits as part of a non-credit CP program; instructors with industry experience; bridge classes and multiple entry points for students without a secondary degree; and a community college location that fostered a college student identity. Practices that promoted success at individual case study agencies included integrating departments that previously worked separately, a contextualized language arts curriculum that does not require instructor industry expertise, exit rather than entry requirements, a simulated work environment, peer teaching, and a paid internship.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This Institute of Education Sciences-funded study was the first to map the landscape of CP in Chicago, Houston, and Miami. Career pathways are burgeoning: 94% of responding agencies had or were developing a CP program. However, many CP classes are new, and adult education agencies are still discerning how to design, implement, and evaluate them. Both new and established programs are responding to changes related to funders and state and federal policies. The findings underscore the great variation in CP design and implementation, as well

as common and distinctive features that are promising strategies for supporting student success. (For more detailed findings, see the final project report at <http://www.adulpthways.psu.edu>.)

Educators need to ensure that lower-level students can access substantive CP classes and progress from entry-level basic skills classes to higher-level CTE classes. More funding is needed for support services, which can enhance persistence and socio-economic stability. We posit that wraparound supports work by decreasing the “cognitive load” of poverty and expanding learners’ “mental bandwidth” (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013) to focus on academics. Third, interim outcomes are needed to capture progress toward longer-term goals. Agencies in a given city should consider adopting some common measures to demonstrate their collective impact. Policymakers and funders also need to ensure that accountability measures do not unwittingly reward programs for serving higher-level students (i.e., creaming). Finally, funders and policy makers can support CP coordination efforts across provider systems and funding streams. WIOA requires greater coordination between workforce and adult education entities, but our findings highlight some of the attendant challenges. In sum, this study elucidates how adult education providers in three of the nation’s largest, most diverse cities are implementing CP.

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